STRANGE TRUTH
poems by
"ELSPETH"

$2.00

STRANGE TRUTH

By 'Elspeth'

WHO is 'Elspeth'?

All New York buzzed with this question when her poems first appeared in the 'Conning Tower' of the *World*. And with her subsequent successes in the *New Yorker*, all America awoke to the problem. From remote hamlets came letters written by inflamed men, who recognized in her their long-lost soul mate. 'You have plumbed the secret places of my heart,' cried one. 'Won't you lunch with me?' And another, 'You have bitten the apple, and know good and evil. I can see that you are a bruised and tortured soul.'

'Elspeth' was not unmoved: she brushed away a tear, but she continued silent.

Now, at last, the Great Unknown is known. She has CONFESSED ALL in a book of poems that Heine might have written if he had come under the influence of Dorothy Parker.

Strange Truth

Poems by

'ELSPETH'

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Strange Truth

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BY

'ELSPETH'

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

Boston and New York

1929

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TO

MY FATHER AND MOTHER

JOHN MAC DUFFIE

ABBY PARSONS MAC DUFFIE

Thank you
F. P. A.
of
'The Conning Tower'
in the *New York World*

Acknowledgment is also made to *The New Yorker*, *The Commonweal*, *The Smith College Quarterly*, and *The Sewanee Review*, for their permission to include in this book poems which have appeared on their pages.

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Strange Truth

I

Strange Truth

BIBLIOPHILE

STRANGE it is, and cruel, too,
That no matter where I look,
I see silly people who
Swear they read me like a book:

Understand each word of mine,
Comprehend each long-drawn sigh.
They translate me, line by line,
And will do so till I die.

Hence I pray, ere life is fled,
I shall meet the perfect lover
Who will leave the book unread,
Cherishing its tattered cover.

TO A PERSON

If I could only make you see
This is what it means to me:
It's no use talking to your cool, pale eyes.
It's no use saying it's all just lies.
You do know something, I'll grant you that.
You have logic, and you talk me flat;
'Money is money, and it costs to eat.
It's fine to stand upon your own two feet.'

But that's not what I'm speaking of.
Now laugh, lady,
I mean LOVE.

POSSIBLY

He wore a frock coat
And a silk hat.
He wore a gray tie —
It might have been that.

I could hear his bitter voice
From where I sat.
I could see his bitter smile —
It might have been that.

A nice man to listen to
And to look at.
He never glanced my way —
It *might* have been that.

SCARE-CAT

If I be honest, why deny the fear
That makes me hesitant to meet to-morrow?
To-day and yesterday have been so dear.
What brave man runs to meet a chance of sorrow?
We have gone lightly down a wooded road.
We have heard music when the air was still.
We have joined hands beneath a common load.
We have watched twilight climb a little hill.

I am distrustful of more questing hours.
The dusk is cooler than the light of moon.
The empty garden is still gay with flowers,
And Chopin still can spin a dancing tune.

FORECAST

He has told me more than once
That I'm really clever.
She will be a darling dunce
He will love forever.

He has praised the songs I sing
Like a gallant fellow.
She will be a little thing
With hair of spun yellow.

He admired my bitterness,
Lashing life with whips.
He will wait to hear her 'yes'
Whispered by shy lips.

YES, ISN'T IT?

How do you do — yes, isn't it?
A very early spring.
(Don't look at me like that —
You'll spoil everything.)

Where's Eleanor . . . she is?
Think what she misses!
(Can't you think of anything
But kisses, kisses, kisses?)

Must you go? It's been so nice —
Just this short glimpse of you!
(Need I shout to every one
That I love you, *love* you?)

EVENING PRAYER

He talked a long time of wickedness and sin.
I saw a clear star as I came in.

He blessed the pennies in a great gold dish.
I saw a new moon and I wished a wish.

Far down the chancel, 'Amen,' he said.
And in just ten minutes I was home in bed.

ABOUT YOU AND ME

Your hands have freed my fettered sight,
Opened my lips for speech,
Brought down to me the lovely night,
Put stars within my reach.

My hands are eager, clumsy, shy.
How insolent they are,
That hope to keep your gift of sky
And think to hold your star!

BUDGET

We could hang my Chartres upon a lamplit wall.
We could put your brasses on a table in the hall.
We could put my Morley where the sun would strike the
blue,
And I think your heavy chair is big enough for two.

. . . . . .

We could put my curtains in the window to the west.
We could put your Chinese rug wherever you like best.
We'd write all the morning and talk all afternoon,
And there will be a fire-escape for looking at the moon.

THOUGHTS TO LOHENGRIN

THERE'S less in a wedding march than you'd think.
You don't need a bridesmaid and flower-girl in pink.

. . . . . .

You don't need a preacher. The legal service binds.
No boy choir can prevent a change of minds.

. . . . . .

You don't need a white veil or a silk hat.
Sign on the dotted line, and leave it at that.

. . . . . .

No frills and feathers. No fame and fuss.
All that this wedding needs
Seems to be
US.

EPITHALAMIUM

I'LL admit I'm humble now
Muttering my marriage vow.

I am sober, neat and quiet.
I'm devoted to your diet.

If I think, I do not show it.
If I fret, you do not know it.

But the day will come, my lad,
When you'll find life turning bad.

You will whistle long for me —
And, my darling, there I'LL BE!

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

I

Answer me one burning question:
Is this love or indigestion?

II

This cloth I use when serving tea.
At lunch I use another.
What nobler calling can there be
Than that of Wife and Mother?

III

At breakfast a husband is cheery or blue.
At dinner he's blue or he's cheery.
And when you've admitted these facts to be true,
You've mastered the whole subject, dearie.

IT'S A FIB

If you are a little girl,
I will dress you neatly.
I will teach you first of all
How to say 'yes' sweetly.

If you are a little boy,
I will dress you neatly.
I will teach you first of all
How to say 'no' sweetly.

Do not listen when they say
That your silly mother
Never to her dying day
Knew one from the other.

THEATRICALS

I LIKED the music and the light upon my hair.
I liked the way I looked when I stood there.

I liked clapping hands and faces lit with glee.
I liked the pretty things people said to me.

It was a clever play; I had a lovely part.
It was ridiculous to learn it all by heart.

VOW

I SHAN'T fall in love again
  For a long while.
It ruins my digestion
  And my literary style.

It chokes my little verses
  And tramples on my prose.
But what your gray eyes ask of me —
  I'll grant you, I suppose.

TO A GENTLEMAN

If I did things properly,
I'd stay indoors for shame.
I'd fawn upon your memory
Or weep to hear your name.

Although I can recall your name,
What color were your eyes?
Were you the one who hurt my pride,
Or he who told me lies?

INSURED

I HAVEN'T smashed a mirror
Since I was four.
I keep a horseshoe
Over my door.

I have a plaster saint,
Painted pink and white.
She hears my proper prayers,
Morning and night.

I've avoided ladders
And little black cats.
I keep away from thunder,
June bugs, and bats.

Here is my rabbit's foot,
Safe at my hand,
And on my finger
I wear a gold band.

PROFESSOR'S WIFE

I saw the river with lights in it;
I saw the sky break for a minute;
I saw a blown scarf of pale smoke;
I saw the sun when the sky broke;

Some one called me wise and good,
But, he said, misunderstood;
I was, he told me, like a star,
Subtle, exquisite, and far.

And always, if I'm glad at all,
'Twill be for things as cheap and small:
Lights and flattery, smoke and sky —
These are what will not let me die.

PAYMENT OVERDUE

WHAT about the piper?
I should think he'd play,
Just to see the people dance
And wave the fee away.

Listen, child!
This is the way it is;
No bold laughter
For coming sorrow's sake.
No great passion
For fear a heart will break.
No glimpse of moonlight
For thinking of the day.
Neither gift nor giving
For thinking what's to pay.

C.O.D.

If I had said 'yes, ma'am,'
Every time she asked me,
If I had worn a gray frock
Rather than a red,
I would not know the music
Of rain in the night-time;
I'd never known a lover's arms
Could make so hard a bed.

If I had trod gently
On her velvet carpet,
If I had played nicely
As other children do,
I would not know what comfort
Is the touch of silence;
I'd never known the difference
Between the false and true.

If I had sewn lightly
On her bit of linen,
If I had heard eagerly
Everything she said,
I would not know the cruelty
Of a frosty morning;
I'd never known why wise folk
Wish that they were dead.

CONGRATULATIONS ON AN ENGAGEMENT

We talked of sorrow:
When and how
You have forgotten
Before now.

To-day we talk of other things:
The way your chosen lady sings;
The way she smiles; the way her hair
Blows on the soft, uneasy air;
I hope I listen with good grace,
With eyes intent upon your face.
I hope my clinking words ring true,
For they are neither wise nor new.

Our talk was brave
And full of laughter.
I have remembered
Long, long after.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

You have the deal, my dear.
I'll make the pack.
(Why did they make this dress
Tight across the back?)

I'll double three no trumps —
Who has the aces?
(I'll hunt that woman up
Who lifts faces.)

We had the honors then,
For I had the Queen.
(If he is late to-night
I'll make a scene.)

I'm afraid I trumped your king,
How stupid of me!
(How does a person know?
Did he ever love me?)

WEEK-END

Must I tell you again and again
It was the sky and the sea?
It had nothing to do with men
And little with me.

It was only the touch
Of salt on my cheek
Which I loved so much
That I could not speak;
And the spread of sand
To a crest of dune
I could understand
Like a nursery tune.
All that breathless blue
Was so good to find.
It was, somehow, new —
It was cool and kind.
There was so much space
Above and around.
The sea in that place
Made a laughing sound.

It was just that I wanted to be
One with the sky and sea;
One with that eloquent blue
And nothing at all to you.

RUIN

I SUPPOSE I built the palace
Out of pretty shoddy stuff,
But the fact it was a palace
Would have been enough.

If it were wind or lightning
That laid my palace low,
I'd have lived there in the ruins
And not have minded so.

But I look at gold-veined marble
Impotent upon the sand,
Knowing that the storm that felled it
Was no larger than my hand.

SHE SAYS

She is more old than I and more clever;
She says, 'Close the book now, forever.'
Forever is a long word once it's said.
It's like being married.
It's like being dead.

She peers reprovingly at his letter,
But what he didn't write, I know better.
She hears reprovingly his last word,
But what he didn't say, I have heard.

She won't let me read them over and over.
She wants me to listen to another lover.
'Give him up forever,' is what she said.
It's like being married.
It's like being dead.

I SAW IT

When she was a little thing,
She saw a spirit cowed;
Saw a sharp and cruel word
Humble some one proud.

She was very quick to learn,
She was very young,
So she taught a bitter twist
To her clever tongue.

Strange that when a proper lad
Spoke her soft and low,
She should still speak Billingsgate,
Still act virago.

Though he left her cheerily,
I saw a spirit cowed;
Saw a sharp and cruel word
Humble some one proud.

AT HOME

Twenty feet between us
And half as many years;
Little crests of bitterness
And salt rain of tears.

. . . . . .

You were very busy
With a sweetcake and some tea,
Holding them with gentle hands
Which once held me.

. . . . . .

I didn't stop to hear you speak
Or see you raise your head.
I had other calls to make
And you were better dead.

I GUESS

And I shall go down to my grave, I guess,
Wishing my 'no' had been a 'yes.'
Wishing I had not shook my head
But spoken like a man instead.

And I'll grow older, I suppose,
Sad that my 'yes-es' were not 'no-es';
Beating my breast for what I said,
Mourning I was not still, instead.

And like a moon, high in a tree
You will stare coldly down on me —
At last a part of silent clay
Who once had far too much to say.

TO A YOUNG MAN WHO IS AFRAID HE IS POLYGAMOUS

Look in books of wits and sages;
Study long their tidy pages.
Every one repeats the same:
Man's love wavers like a flame.

Listen to the songs and ditties
Of a million towns and cities.
This refrain through each one goes:
Man's love withers like a rose.

Ask whatever maid you meet,
If she be both true and sweet.
She can tell you, an she please:
Man's love listeth like the breeze.

Rise and let your dewy gaze
Wander down more merry ways.
Are you fancy-free and wild?
Would to God you *were*, my child!

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

It was only yesterday
That on bended knees,
I was huddled down to pray,
'Please, God, please ——'

'Give me quietness again
And a peaceful mind.
I have had enough of men,
Give me my own kind.

'Give me women for my friends —
Gentle words and voices.'
All I ask for, Heaven sends
And my heart rejoices.

That was only yesterday.
Still it seems a year.
I'll be careful how I pray —
Back again, my dear?

I

MONDAY

The ink is red.
The child is blue.
What can a thoughtful
Teacher do?

II

TUESDAY

I LOVE to see a little soul
Before my startled gaze unroll.
I even love a little dunce
AND HOW I LOVE THE SUMMER MUNCE!

III

WEDNESDAY

I GRIEVE about my fellow-men
For dark and dreary is their way.
But I remember, now and then,
That once a week they get their pay.

IV

THURSDAY

The snow outside is wet and dirty.
Every day I'm nearer thirty.
My fate will be to die a maid,
And also live one, I'm afraid.

V

FRIDAY

'America, America'
Through nasal cavities I whine.
'America, America.'
(I'm sailing on the White Star line.)

A SCHOOLMARM GREETS HER CLASS

Ah, good-morning, Sally Wales!
(How noisily she goes,
And her father never fails
To dance upon my toes.)

Can't do your addition, Sue?
Try it, dear, once more.
(May you teach your mother to
Keep her auction score.)

Here is Mary-Ellen-Clair
Spells a word and misses.
(Need a little child fall heir
To giving noisy kisses?)

Tommy's knife and Neddoe's ball
Hoarded in your pants, sir!
Give them back (and ask your aunt
For my 'Dusty Answer').

Polly, what a naughty word!
Wash your mouth with soap.
(That your father be discreet
Is more than I hope!)

OUTLINE OF EDUCATION

When I was but a pre-school child
My moral life was somewhat wild.
At eighteen months I gave up toys
And seriously studied boys.

At five the teachers thought me bright,
Though I could neither read nor write,
I knew what lad would do my work
And paid him with a tender smirk.

Then from the doors of Mrs. May's
I went to Wednesday matinées.
I learned the power of wet eyes,
Of trembling lips and troubled sighs.

In Neuilly, France, they finished me
In irresistibility.
But now I am fed up with men
And wish I were a child again.

If you have ever noticed it
This sort of stuff is always writ
By lady poetesses who
Are never less than thirty-two.

They thus affirm with flashing glance
Their dauntless stand against Romance!

II

SUNLIGHT

The narrow street is awash with light;
Window and doorway, glittering bright.
Snow in the gutter, cold as a star —
Lord, what idiots you and I are!

LAMPLIGHT

I could sit here a long, long time
Hearing your voice like a deep-throated bird's;
The flowing cadences fall and climb,
The exquisite touch of your lips on the words:
Watching your face and your long brown hand
Shading your face from the lamp's full moon.
The story is easy to understand —
It is all one word, and that one word, 'Soon.'

CANDLELIGHT

I WILL remember this if I can,
The candle, blown by your quick breath's fan,
Your eyes dark with shadow or pain,
And at my door the sound of rain:
The smell of your overcoat, rough and wet . . .
And did you kiss me? I forget.

DARK

Forever and forever the Dark must go
Between man's eyes and the touch of sun
So it has been since the world was begun.
So it will be, as long and slow
As a tideless river's sullen flow.
The hungry night will drink from the breast
Of life, without cease or pause or rest.

And love, when that time will be,
Will be hushed immutably.
Our love will be stilled
By the Dark, strong-willed
To silence the quick, uneasy breath
With a knife as keen as the edge of death.
Love, lacking flare and spark,
Under the heel of the great Dark!
There will be no more hunger or thirst
When the vials of Dark have burst;
No more pitiless seeking
When the voices of Dark are speaking.

Never the flash of sun from a wave to wave,
Or the glint of gold on the arm of a favorite slave;
Only the silent Dark, like a great curtain,
Severe, implacable and certain,

Dark

Hooding the face of earth with merciless black.
No more looking ahead, no more looking back.

Even in youth our children will open their eyes
With no more wonder or dream, or hint of surprise.
They will stretch cold hands imploringly to the Dark,
But nothing will see them at all, and nothing hark.
And God have pity, I hope, on those after
Who hear in the deluge of Dark their impotent laughter.

No more will the hand of friend be firm to my hand
When Dark has betrayed all the trust that friends
understand;
When friend finds nothing but Dark in his fond embrace
And looks on Dark instead of the well-loved face.

All this I know. I have seen the coming of night.
I am watching the stars die out and the ebb of light.
All that was love and passion and pain will soon be gone.
There is nothing to do but wait for the Dark's own dawn.
Nothing to do but recall, while a few stars shine,
The glitter and glow and glare which have been mine;
Repeating the names which I gave, in my folly, to
Light —
For a charm, for a rune, for a gleam in the long Dark
night.

BIRTHDAY CARD

And if I count them once again
I'll know the number, but what then?
It only stands for just so much
Hours and days and years and such,
With little of it all put by
To cheer me on the day I die.

There was a day — but why recall
What was so pitifully small?
There was a face — but why revive
A love so distantly alive?
There was a voice, but why still list
For what was long and sorely missed?

And what is more, for all my fears
No doubt I'll live for years and years,
Remembering, despite my pride
A face, a voice, a love that died;
Forgetting, to my sullen shame
Love's hour, love's promise and love's name.

TESTAMENT

But all my nights and all my days
I've spent in such unthrifty ways;
Without providing for to-morrow
I've squandered happiness and sorrow.

Now I can neither love nor hate,
Who was so proudly profligate.
The meager years can only be
In ranks of grim austerity,
Where I must learn at last to dole
The hoarded pennies of my soul.

And you, my dear, will be but heir
To thin-lipped smile and frozen stare.

INVULNERABLE

I CAN never know again
  The prick of thorn or sword;
The harsh caress of pain
  For the glory of the Lord.
The slowly throbbing flow
  Of blood from the vein
I shall not need to know
  Again.

And if you pity me so
  With but little to gain,
Remember how gladly I go
  From the house of pain.
And when there are stars to see
  Or wind to blow,
Be sure there is plenty for me
  To know.

RULES AND REGULATIONS

THERE were four rows of desks and chairs
Set together in stiff pairs.
The teacher's desk was stiffer still,
Facing them with rigid will.
Windows hung too high for view.
You looked at me and I at you.
I looked at you, felt sick and old
To find your faces were so cold:
Cold braided hair brushed straight and sleek.
Cold eyebrows shadowing cold cheek.
A child's cold eyes, a child's cold lips —
Books held between cold fingertips.

One was different.
She sat as if her thoughts were company.
She read a mystery —
Silent,
Still.
But the sight of her started the blood and the pulses.
She was too quiet, too warm, too rich —
Too vivid a woman
For being hidden among cold children.
Some trace of New England winter in my veins
Warned me
She is not GOOD.

Strange Truth

It is not right to be so beautiful.
It is not right to make a schoolroom throb,
As if one struck the full flare of a harp's strings
With the open palm.

Just so the air of Eden throbbed for Lilith long ago.
Dear Lilith, first-loved lady, first made fair
When the black night fell on Eden, and no morn
Rose over Paradise to show how fair was Lilith.
Lilith had no need of moonlight.
Lilith sat under a tree in the darkness
Thinking her thoughts of mystery and wisdom,
Breathing into Paradise a fragrance
That sang to the darkness all around her.
'*I am Lilith,*
The first-loved lady.'
Lilith under her tree
Warm with love.
All this happened before God was made.
When God came, He saw Lilith —
Overthrew her utterly, thrust her from His sight.
She was wicked (or she had a wicked lover)
She couldn't stay in Paradise; *it wouldn't be right!*
Lovely Lilith dreams to-day, never understands
Why it was she was cast out by God's indignant hands.
She does not weep for Eden or the man of Paradise.
Other wicked lovers have dried Lilith's eyes.

To-morrow the law will act.
Cold severity will rule the schoolroom once more.

Rules and Regulations

She will go who sits quietly and stirs the pulses.
Close the book, warm hands.
Lift your heavy eyelids, child.
Score me with the fires that burn there.
For I know what you know.
I feel what you feel.
You walk with life and are warm.
I am more furtive.

There are four rows of desks and chairs
Set together in stiff pairs.
The teacher's desk is stiffer still,
Facing them with rigid will.
Windows hang too high for view,
You look at me and I at you.

WIDOWED

(1)

Myself in this world's sorry sheath
I will keep fair for funeral wreath,
When they shall tell me you are dead
And all your gusty laughter fled.

I will be song and flaming star
In whatsoever place you are.
I will lie beautiful and bright
Between your shut eyes and the night.

Each flower of mine, each copper leaf
Will keep you from their stormy grief.
And I of all the world will mark
How you lie laughing in the dark.

(2)

This is my most profound belief:
It is a crime to boast of grief;
To wear her garments as a sign
That for a season she is mine;
To bear the marks upon my face
Of her last passionate embrace.

There is a way of wearing black
Which is more careless than the lack

Of it. Earth holds no proper place
Where one may walk with stricken face.
It is a sin to speak with tears
Which break the heart of him who hears.

I will wear blue and gold and red.
I will wear flowers, thus, instead.
I will be wanton, wild and free.
Oh, never will you learn from me
That Grief is with me here and now!
I wear her kiss upon my brow.

(3)

THERE — I have shut the door.
I won't cry any more.
'The-world-is-very-fair-
And-God-is-everywhere.'

I will forget him soon,
After the next new moon.
'One must be brave.'

. . . . . .

He in a grave?

(4)

IT makes quite a picture as my daughter stands
With leaves of music in her childish hands:

The soft light falling on her twisted braid,
Her chin uptilted lest she seem afraid.

If I only need not listen to the word she sings
Over and over till the whole room rings,
Clangs and clatters like a great bronze bell,
Booms and crashes like the ocean's swell;
One word over she has sung and said,
Chirped like a robin the one word — 'dead.'

(5)

She has her father's way, his turn of head,
His laughter and his voice upon the stair.
Strange these should live so long when he is dead:
Laughter, and a shadow on bright hair.

Strange that a child should catch me at my throat
With hands of hunger and a touch of fire;
Just by her piping voice dropped one low note —
Just by her voice, tuned low to his desire!

SAINT'S DAY

I SHAN'T have a minute —
  It will be all this way —
Work, errands, and hurry
  Through the whole day.

I'll go about my business
  And drop into my bed,
Far too tired to mutter
  Prayers I might have said.

They will burn their candles
  For your spirit's flight,
But I will know the dark indeed
  Who knew with you the light.

POVERTY

I

Poorly dressed and poorly shod
I will go my way to God:
Sun for light and sky for cover,
Poverty, my shabby lover.
I have forgot if once I knew
Richness that I learned of you,
Splendor that you shared with me.
(Miserere Domine.)

CHASTITY

II

I WILL not think of you to-day.
I will kneel quietly and pray.
I have no memory to bind.
My heart is dead, my heart is blind.
To-night I can in all truth say,
'I had no need of you to-day.'
You are not anything to me.
(Miserere Domine.)

OBEDIENCE

III

My hands have done each stupid task
That any one could dream or ask.
My feet have run the whole day through
On errands that I had to do.
I have gone supperless to bed,
I have done everything You said.
Now will You give him back to me?
(Miserere, Domine.)

COMPLINES[1]

Words in a row, like beads on a cord,
(Hail, Mary, mother of God,)
Love is a hymn to be sung to the Lord.
(Hail, Mary.)

Say them over, again and again,
(Hail, Mary, mother of God,)
Whisper a prayer for the least of men.
(Hail, Mary.)

Whisper a prayer and bow the head,
(Hail, Mary, mother of God,)
Lay me down on my childish bed.
(Hail, Mary.)

Fold the hands on the quiet breast,
(Hail, Mary, mother of God,)
So for a little while — rest, ah, rest —
(Hail, Mary.)

[1] The last service of the day in the Roman Catholic Church.

FIFTH AT THIRTY-NINTH STREET

I HEARD your voice to-day, as clear as clear,
The deep, dear sound of it, something like a bell;
The little note of laughter that I used to hear,
The minor note of wistfulness I knew so well.

I heard your voice to-day, passionate and low,
Held it for a moment in my heart's embrace;
I turned quickly, but I knew it wasn't so —
And stood there staring in an old priest's face.

TO A TEACHER

VERY well, Maestro, I will learn my lesson.
Close the book gently with a flower for a mark.
I will read it over early in the morning.
I will say it over as I lie here in the dark.

The words are blade-sharp and cruel like a dagger,
But I'll say them perfectly before to-morrow's done.
I'll shout them like a parrot at the callow moonlight,
Bawl them like a madman at the rising sun.

You will smile, Maestro, upon your proper pupil,
Hearing how the words trip from my facile tongue.
Who knows? Some day this may be forgotten —
The dagger-cruel wisdom I learned when I was young.

ONE DAY

It will be a bitter day when I set out,
  Frost upon the hedges and hoar upon the grass;
Not a word from child or man but a mocking shout,
  Not a kindly wave of hand from any one I pass.

It will be a starless night when I come back,
  Wind along the roof-tree and rain along the eaves;
Not a single door or hearth but will be black,
  Not a single pathway swept clean of leaves.

It will be a lonely while I shall be gone,
  Back against the wind and rain, face against the frost;
With no memory to keep or thought to smile upon,
  Looking for a little thing long ago lost.

PREACHMENT

THERE! it's like this —
Snow on snow.
Let time sift down
As still and slow.

It will fill hollows
Where wolves lie.
It will crown summits
Where gods die.

It will deal kindly
With lonely places.
It will sweep gently
The starry spaces.

But, oh, remember
Despite its screening,
Shapes beneath snow
Give snow its meaning.

TO A YOUNG SUICIDE

How could you bear to leave it?
This dark, quiet rain
Blurring the light along the window-pane;
The streets, as misty as a Druid wood,
The sight and feel of it —
So good, so good!
Walking alone around the little square,
The hint of April on the rain-wet air;
Silence unbroken by a word or breath —
What could you hope to find
More fair in death?

III

CHARTRES

(For a detail of the porte-sud of Chartres Cathedral)

THESE are the queens of Judah and their kings,
Their cerements wrapped round them like furled wings;
Their eyes are gentle, set in steadfast gaze;
Their hands are folded in the guise of praise;
Upon their lips has lain the breath of prayer;
Worship is woven in their twisted hair;
Upon their strength a great cathedral leans . .
These are the kings of Judah and their queens.

SCHEIDEGG

(Switzerland)

Depths of blue I cannot guess
  And skies I cannot measure
Give me scorn of happiness,
  Give me shame of pleasure.

Can I laugh when such as these
  Stark and solemn stand,
Holding up stark mysteries
  On God's either hand?

Once I've tasted lofty things
  I have need of others:
Little birds on homing wings,
  Babies and their mothers.

CAPRI TO SORRENTO

Blue,
Iridescent as a diamond's heart,
Limpid as a sapphire's core;
Curling blue lip of laughter at the steamer's prow;
Great, smooth, shining, sleek, lustrous blue
On her every side.

And on her deck
Americans.
Women in clothes like elephant's skins
And shoes as dusty.
Mouths carefully rouged,
Hats grey with discouragement.
Women with Florentine beads,
(*Come aroun' lady,*
Verra chip —
W'at you give me?)
Bargains in amber,
Bargains in pearl,
Eyes full of lust, and plucking hands.
Hunger for something.

Hunger in every face
Then snatching without question —
At life.

Strange Truth

Stones for bread,
Husks which swine will not touch.
While there is everywhere
The sweet grave blue of God
Which fills the hungry
With good things.

GEOGRAPHY

This is the lovely curve where Naples glows
In stark white splendor under stark white sun;
Here on this spot an Alpine flower grows,
And here the river streets of Venice run.
There is a little hill which rises here
Where one may watch the Arno creeping by;
This is where moon and stars become more near
Held in the velvet grasp of southern sky.
Here is a slope of sand like yellow grain
Turned silver overnight by silver moon.
Waves on the shingle sigh, 'Come back again.'
Waves on the shingle whisper softly, 'Soon.'
Dust the globe carefully. Put it back once more.
Then go out quietly and shut the door.

NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE

All right, we'll leave the little village there.
But will it surely be like that again?
Putting on scarlet for the ardent rain,
Wearing bright leaves like flowers in its hair?
Are you quite sure the place will keep its look
Of seeking nothing and of keeping all,
Fragile and fair behind a fieldstone wall,
Secret and sweet behind a leaf-gold brook?
Will there be lamplight when I come once more?
And will the sky still hide its lovely face
With branches woven into wet black lace,
Just as its gentle eyes were veiled before?
I am afraid. Turn back while we are near.
To-morrow never spared what I held dear.

TO MONSIEUR

Why should I whet the keen edge of my wit
That you may match mine with a keener thrust?
Now I will do just as I wish with it,
And watch it crumble to a shining dust.
There are more lovely things to keep than those
Which turn to ruin what their pin-points touch.
I hear your laughter when I prize a rose,
Though men have ever loved that flower much.
You are ashamed of your half-tenderness,
Demand a rapier to meet yours — though
Swords are no solace in great loneliness,
Which is a wisdom you will some day know.

TO A LITTLE BOY SICK

But if I hold your hand and smooth your head
Perhaps you'll think of something nice instead.
Of little waves like fairies on the beach,
Making their special kind of pebbly speech.
Talking together of the games they know,
And where the big waves come from, where they go;
Telling each other stories of sea birds
All in their special kind of salty words.
A little boat is sailing by close to the shore.
There's some one in it. What's he waving for?
He says, 'Come out and sail the windy sea
And play at being Admirals with me.'
He says, 'I have an anchor and an oar.
There is a cabin with a tiny door.
There is a rudder and an iron keel
And everything upon this boat is *real.*
I have some sandwiches and milk to drink.
I have just everything a boy could think
Of.' Then he sets afloat.
Pushing toward us, a small row boat.
You row. Please do, and I will steer.
The sail boat, after all, is pretty near.
He is an Admiral and so are you.
I am a member of the good ship's crew.

To a Little Boy Sick

How blue great Western and Small Flying are!
How low Grandfadder's house looks when it's far!
You smile, Sir Admiral, my dear, my love —
What distant country are you dreaming of?

LADY IN MOURNING

She wears black
  Like a muffling shroud.
She came back to us,
  Fair and proud.

She sees naught
  With open eyes.
Death has taught
  Her what is wise.

Deaf and still
  She goes her way.
She never will
  Have more to say.

She gives preacher
  Just a nod.
Another teacher
  Showed her God.

And down by the stream
  Forever after,
She walks in a dream
  Of love and laughter.

GRAN'THER

It's just spring weather.
I'll pull myself together.
It must be something in the day.
It's silly to go on this way.

I'll tell you . . .
I found this letter . . .

If you look at the top you'll see the date —
It's either ninety-six or ninety-eight.
It says, 'God bless the baby.'
That was me.
Then my name. Now you see
You feel the same.
I need it now, God knows.
Do you suppose
An old man's blessing could last all these years?
An old man's voice, befogged with tears
Blessing a child he never lived to see?
God bless the baby.
That was me.

PAULINE

Her old voice is less querulous;
  Her old eyes are less sharp.
Her fingers no more pluck at air
  As at a tuneless harp.

She has come home from distant doors
  Shut gladly on her going,
And what she thinks or what she feels
  There is no way of knowing.

She sits up very straight and still
  With Paisley shawl for cover.
Bright eyes, soft cheek, and trembling lip,
  Wait Death, the tardy lover.

COUSIN ESTHER

That's what you are!
A piece of colored glass, tempered by life
Into strength
And resistance.
You have a brilliance of your own.
Could you feel love?
(Nor quick passion, glinting over you)
Do you know pain?
You turn in the sunshine.
Throwing off countless thin lights,
Millions of shredded colors,
And a myriad reflections.

AUNT MAY

Will I, being alone, walk my way as proud?
God knows.
You walk the quiet streets of life
With the solitary splendor of a queen
Or of a lonely child.
Behind your eyes there is pageantry —
Venice in Carnival,
The Boul' 'Mich at twilight.
Around your neck there is the pull
Of small, strong arms, insistent.
And on your lips, sleeps the kiss your mother
Left there.

BLACK SHEEP

Awhile ago
You were the Little God Pan;
Your hair grew wildly like dark prairie grass.
Your eyes mocked every one
And your mouth brimmed with cruel laughter.
Your hands were quick and selfish,
Snatching and unkind.
God, but you were beautiful!
Between my love and you
Was your mocking face, rippling with laughter.

Yesterday
You were the weary god, Christ.
Your hair hung over tired eyes.
Your mouth drooped hungrily,
Fed with bitterness.
Your hands were slow and gentle,
Wrenched and shaken.
God, but you were beautiful!
Between my love and you
Was a little candle-lit face, bright with worship.

MISS CLIMENA

It was a sort of arrogant young pride;
Something that would not hush itself inside
That you despised. You hated, too, the look
Of dream I lifted from my open book.
My walk was impudent, my head too high,
My glance too stony and too cold of eye:
You didn't even like the way I stood.
I never listened as a nice girl should.
You looked at me, and prayed with bitter spite
That God would smash my way of being right.
God answers prayers like that with fire and sword.
A broken and a contrite heart contents the Lord.
You did not need to ask Him quite so soon.
He might have granted me another June.

TO A YOUNG SAILOR

She was a hard mistress; she was wise
  Who had him first;
Giving him dream for his eyes,
  For his soul, thirst.

Giving him hunger of heart
  For the world's rim;
Making a sweet life apart
  For herself and him.

Teaching him how to be kind,
  She, the cruel and ruthless;
Teaching him honor of mind,
  Who herself was so truthless.

He was hers first and he still shall be,
  Though his long trick's over.
That is the way of the sea,
  And the sea's lover.

IV

THE LAST FORTRESS

My face once held a look of childish awe;
The eyes were pools of dream and ecstasy;
All things were rare and lovely that I saw;
The world was beautiful one time to me.
To-day I know the secrets and the wiles
The world commands to make an arrant fool.
I know the way that flattery beguiles,
I know the skillful way men use a tool.
There are no fairies in the windswept grass.
There is no magic in far-sailing ships.
God is a straw men clutch at as they pass,
And falsehood rests most sweetly on fair lips.
Why should the mirror on the stairs recall
That look — when you are waiting in the hall?

PILGRIMAGE

I WOULD make pilgrimage to-day with him
Who found the spring heart-stirring long ago,
Would take my worship to the wide world's rim,
Breathe it in rapture to what winds may blow.
There on my mountain, candles could not live.
Incense would scatter on the moving air.
One offering only could my swift soul give,
One name could move my eager lips to prayer.
The shrine I keep in April is a place
Where I may say the one word of my creed,
Gazing with closed eyes on a half-dreamed face,
Telling a Rosary hung with a single bead.
Call it not blasphemy that has linked the two —
The God of April and an April you.

TO A YOUNG LADY

With what mild tumult in her gentle breast
She is departing on her magic quest!
She weighs the merits of her golden gown
And eyes its folded petals with a frown.
She holds her mirror in a fleeting pose
To catch the lilting echo of her nose.
She sighs to watch the dimple flashing in
Above the chiseled firmness of her chin.
She searches gravely, with wide, anxious eyes
For any beauty which by fortune lies
In the sweet oval of her eager face;
She prays for loveliness and sudden grace.
She takes a gallant sacrament and gay,
Then sets her dancing feet on love's highway.

FROM YOUR MOTHER'S GARDEN

This is a flower I have no right to touch,
This crumpled rose that blossomed for your sake,
Picked by the hands that loved you overmuch.
It is too rich a gift for me to take.
It wears the color of a nursery fire,
The heart'ning flicker of a bedside light
For little boys who watch the dusk climb higher
And grow wide-eyed in staring at the night.
It breathes the fragrance of small yellowed frocks
Put gently by to bridge time's hurried stream,
Stored with old treasured picture-books and blocks,
The futile snatching at a fading dream.
It is all love and innocence in dust,
Still breathing tenderness, as mothers must.

DENIAL

It is not cowardice that keeps me still,
Nor is it an admission they speak true.
I let them have their loud-voiced, laughing will,
I let them speak their shabby scorn of you.
I close my lids before their mocking eyes.
I shut my ears to what they shouted loud.
I will be constant, unforgetting, wise.
In secret and in silence I am proud.
Hate is too grand a passion to expend
On shrill words padded with an empty boast.
Grief is too splendid for a faithless friend.
I will not mourn the passing of a ghost.
(So Peter must have taught his pen to write
For meager solace in the weary night.)

PERSONAL

I THOUGHT I'd let you know I'm still alive.
I bought the Morley that you spoke about.
It's colder every time I venture out
And dark as night when we get out at five.
There is a movie at the Strand to-night
With What's-her-name you liked so well last year.
I guess I'll go. I'd rather than sit here . . .
I had a card from Elsie. She's out West.
From what she said I guess she had the blues;
I think I've told you almost all the news.
Remember me to Michael and the rest.
(Each word is written neatly in its place.
I could have said 'I love you' in less space.)

TO A NEW FIANCÉE

He wrote me yesterday. Of course, I'm glad.
I've had that man a long while on my mind.
Men shouldn't have to live the life he's had.
Besides, I know you're beautiful and kind.
And, since you love him, I suppose you know —
Well, what a child he is, and — sort of shy;
Almost believes in fairies — and he's so
Untouched by life, it almost makes you cry.
His family is God, his name a crown;
He thinks a lot of things are wrong or sin;
He'll find it pretty hard to settle down,
Remembering the countries he's lived in.
Oh, love him, help him, then, with tenderness.
I never knew him well enough, I guess.

TO A NEW FIANCÉ

Of course I'm glad. It's nice of you to write
So soon. I know the way that people feel —
As if they set it down in black and white,
It would be, somehow, truer and more real.
She, yours? That loveliness and ardent grace,
The melody of her, spun out for you;
The bright, mysterious beauty of her face?
Yes, for the moment it is true.
So you can go your stumbling way again,
Speaking big words and laughing much too loud,
Playing Debussy lightly now and then,
Blind and unthinking, arrogantly proud.
Why should I worry? All you'd ever ask
Would be that Praise put on a lovely mask.

LAST WORD

Oh, yes, my dear, from now on it is 'friend.'
It will be hand in hand, quite unaware.
It is much better that the old way end —
The foolish rush of lips to touch your hair;
The sudden shock of finger-tips like flame;
My silly repetition of your name.
Friendship is kinder and it leaves both free.
The pledge is sealed. Your hand on it, this way:
'We are but friends with friendship as a tie.'
It is a little thing for you to say,
Small syllables that, spoken, fade and die.
You have forgotten if you ever knew
How to say simply what is merely true.

MISUNDERSTOOD

So he inhabits with determined will
A marble tower with one narrow eye,
Looking disdainfully from top of hill
Upon less lofty heights and lofty sky.
He is too timorous to risk a fall,
Too fearful of oblivion and of night.
He is content to keep behind a wall,
Although that wall deprive him of his sight.
He is too far above the valley storms
That beat until a tree or human grows;
Too far beneath the touch of sun that warms
The coldest mountain and most ardent rose.
No pity — for he neither sees nor hears
The foolish sights and sounds that cause men fears.

FREE

There must be something lovely in the word,
It has been so long coveted by men.
Yet when they shouted it, my sore heart stirred,
Feeling the old hurt throbbing there again.
It is a flame, they say, a flaring light.
'Oh, follow it, wherever it may go.'
And I stand silent in the kindly night,
For what it truly is, I truly know.
They say it is a trumpet on a hill,
'Oh, hear it, blaring down the stormy sky.'
But I am waiting fearfully and still
And pray that having heard it, I may die.
For anguish, loss and bitterness, these three
Are noisy echoes of their brave word 'free.'

FOR YOUR DAUGHTER'S MOTHER

How could you bear this gold and silver child,
This work of mystery and fragile art,
Enchanted creature, elfin, fay and wild,
Eyes filled with the bright wonder in her heart?
Her every act and motion is a song;
Her step is set to music of a dance;
Sorrow can never check her laughter long,
Nor life withhold its guerdon of romance.
You with your beetling brows, and great black eyes,
Your sullen mouth, your stolid heavy tread,
What have you ever known of windy skies?
Where have you ever tasted fairy bread?
My spirit is less bitter since it knows
You gave to him this fragrant little rose.

TEN YEARS

I HAD forgotten the old frantic prayer,
The tide of terror which came in at night,
The look of hunger on men everywhere,
The acrid sweetness of an hour's delight;
The sound of laughter in long-deafened ears,
The flash of sunlight in half-blinded eyes,
The moments which were forced to compass years,
The certain knowledge of the very wise;
The gift of giving without care or thought,
The futile filling of a human need,
The love and loving which were half-unsought;
Enough one hungered and that one could feed.
Strange I forget it that was once so dear.
That must be blasting and not guns I hear.

LITANY

No — halt the step of Spring on earth, dear God.
Spare me the gentleness of April rain,
The tender spread of green upon the sod,
The eloquence of leaf — not that again!
Deliver me from winds too flower-sweet,
From love, emboldened by the touch of Spring,
From beauty stalking through my ugly street,
From youth, from innocence — from everything
Which would dissolve my spirit's thrall of frost.
Once loosed from winter's fastness, man and earth
Must face again old dreams, that were far better lost,
And feel once more the travail pains of birth.
Good Lord, deliver me from tender truth:
Spare me, good Lord, the eager dreams of youth.

M. E. S.

With what glad clamor will they welcome you,
Calling your name until their broad halls ring!
For where you are there must be laughter, too,
Good laughter, bubbling like an eager spring.
They must be weary of eternal praise,
A little homesick for the things of earth
And hungry for the old, half-foolish ways
Of jest and mimicry and kindly mirth.
We know the way it is: the heavenly place
Will be illumined by a warmth and light.
So we were warmed who looked upon your face,
So once you kept at bay the somber night.
This is no fitting time for tears — oh, hark!
Bright laughter flaring through the silent dark.

MARGIE

There is a wonder on her face,
Like some enchanted sleeping place
Full of half-shadows on half-light
Between the hours of day and night:
Wonder of height and breadth and space
Are in her small delighted face.
There is the feel of windy skies
In the blue candor of her eyes.
The mysteries of moon and star
In her young throat and bosom are.
All the bright beauty God has made
Shines in her, laughing, unafraid.
She is your child, my dear, and rightly
For you held beauty gently — lightly.

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